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Development goes beyond business to work force

As General Electric looked to start up an operation in Montana, it did a smart thing: It ran its job prospects up flagpoles in three parts of the state to see how many potential workers saluted.

Quite a few did, and not too surprisingly, the number of applicants in the Billings area was higher than the number around Great Falls.

Other factors — including a half-million-dollar cash incentive from Billings' development agency — figured in GE Commercial Finance's September decision to build in Billings, but the north-

central Montana job-application exercise underscored what has become recognized as a problem in many parts of Montana, including ours: More qualified workers are needed.

As employment rates reach all-time highs, there's no single solution to that problem. Parents encouraging their out-of-state children to come back; businesses recruiting out of state, and out-of-state job-market promotion all should be in the recruitment toolbox.

Another tool should be more efficiently developing the work force that's already here: high school students.

➤ Our opinion

We're happy to report that a group of Great Falls business and education leaders have begun to take a systematic approach to doing just that.

They started with a trip last month to the Flathead Valley, where businesses, the school district and the local community college worked together over 10 years to develop a coordinated approach to job training. Flathead folks report that only in the past couple of years have the efforts begun to pay

dividends.

We agree with Great Falls Education Association President Mike Picking, who said: "Great Falls doesn't have 10 years."

With unemployment at unheard-of low rates, it's common here for good jobs to sit vacant for months, and there's no way of knowing how much job creation is not happening in that kind of vacuum.

At its most recent meeting last week, the work force development group in Great Falls broke into three subcommittees with distinct missions:

■ Conduct an invento-

ry of all of the vocational and technical programs available in the community at present, including assessments of how well they're working. This simple step should be informative and could open the door to better coordination and possible sharing of resources.

■ Compile what types of jobs existing businesses need to fill and what tips of workers could help attract better-paying jobs to the area.

■ Get a better handle on success rates among graduates of 2- and 4-year postsecondary programs, and look into ways to get high school students thinking more

seriously and earlier about career paths.

The ad hoc group conducting these efforts plans to meet again in early January.

We applaud in advance the work they are doing. We further endorse their plan to reach out to other educators in the region, including at the parochial schools, the University of Great Falls, MSU Northern and in the smaller area towns.

We can recruit businesses until the cows come home, but without adequate labor, cows may be the *only* things coming home in these parts.